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## Unanswered questions

# U.S. should probe Oman Ghana scam

By Claude Lewis  
*Inquirer Editorial Board*

The Oman Ghana Trust Fund, according to one local investigator, represents a "documentable" loss in the United States alone of more than \$100 million. That is a sum that far exceeds initial reports concerning the amount of money taken from American investors by two alleged smooth-talking con artists.

The saga of the Oman Ghana Trust Fund is a fascinating story of mystery, money and international intrigue. Behind the headlines, however, is another story of the failure of an informed U.S. government to take action to stop the alleged fraud that has broken at least one marriage, led one investor to a nervous breakdown, and rained misery, despair and near-poverty upon scores of Philadelphians who collectively lost more than \$15 million.

According to Joe Casey, chief of the district attorney office's economic crimes unit, for several years the FBI has been aware that two men, John Ackah Blay-Miezah of Ghana, West Africa, and Robert Ellis, a Philadelphian, have been the principal operators of the trust fund that may have fleeced millions of dollars from people in many nations.

The FBI had an arrest warrant for Blay-Miezah for a \$250,000 theft at Girard Bank in 1972. But in 1985, while the FBI was still investigating the fund, the warrant was dropped.

The FBI is said to have documents concerning the fraud that if stacked up would exceed 4-feet high. Yet, the bureau has taken little or no action to protect citizens from the silken grasp of the Oman Ghana Trust Fund operators.

An FBI spokesman argued that search warrants of the Police Department were "flawed," and therefore the investigation was corrupted.

The U.S. Customs Service refused to comment. Customs agents have been concerned about a money-laundering operation connected with the fraud. Customs has not been permitted to cooperate in the investigation that landed Blay-Miezah in a jail cell in Ghana where he faces charges of "economic sabotage."

Robert Ellis, Blay-Miezah's U.S. operative, is free on bail. He spun a fascinating tale to authorities involving billions, but continues to insist that though no one has been paid in the 14 years, the trust has existed, everyone will be paid eventually. The latest proposed payoff date: April 14, 1986.

The district attorney and a team of Philadelphia police officers uncovered the fraud only eight days after a complaint from investor Barry Ginsberg and his associates, who have lost more than \$2 million to Blay-Miezah and Ellis. Ginsburg was promised a \$150 million payoff.

Hints of CIA involvement are making the rounds among local officials.

"If we could unravel the scam in weeks, what has the FBI been doing for 14 years?" asked one investigator. District Attorney Ronald Castille characterized the trust as "the largest fraud in the history of ... Philadelphia."

Steve Wehner, deputy chief of the U.S. attorney's frauds section, offered only an icy "no comment," when I asked about allegations by officials of the district attorney's office that he told federal agencies such as the IRS, Customs and the FBI, not to "waste an hour on the investigation. There will be no prosecutions."

The case is enormously complicated with many unanswered questions. Among them:

- Where is the bulk of the more than \$100 million that was fleeced from investors?

- Why was little effective action taken to stop the fraud, especially since FBI files indicate that former U.S. ambassador to Ghana, Shirley Temple Black, cabled from Ghana some 10 years ago, warning about the scam? As late as January 1986, Ellis was still attracting investors. (Mrs. Black called me from California last week to say she could not comment on the record because the matter is in court.)



- Why are local and federal officials at odds over this case and why does the district attorney's office flatly charge that federal agents are disinterested in getting to the bottom of the fraud?

These are few questions that lead some investigators to believe Blay-Miezah, about 60, and Ellis, 42, may be extremely well connected, perhaps as high as the CIA. The complexity of the securities scam have caused investigators to believe the pair are close to the powerful.

The public remains at great financial risk as long as the Oman Ghana Trust Fund continues. Meanwhile, customs officials, the FBI and the fraud section of the U.S. attorney's office are in bitter disagreement with local officials.

As puzzling as the trust-fund operation is, the biggest question of all is why federal officials have not moved forthrightly to protect the public by bringing an end to a costly and destructive multimillion dollar international bunco operation.

If affidavits concerning the trust fund in the district attorney's office are true, the IRS should conduct a criminal investigation into millions in uncollected taxes, customs officers should examine money-laundering operations and the FBI should assist officials nationwide in ending the scam. If ever a case cried out for a federal grand jury investigation, the alleged ripoff by the Oman Ghana Trust Fund seems to be it.